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HIRAM WARREN JOHNSON AND CALIFORNIA'S PROGRESSIVISM

RONALD Gosewisch

Introduction

This paper attempts to define very briefly the Progressive Movement which took place in the first two decades of the 20th Century in America as it manifested itself in California, and Hiram Warren Johnson's role within that movement. It was an unusual phenomenon, in that it took place in a period of prosperity, quite unlike the Populism which preceded it or the New Deal which followed it. Unusual too, perhaps, was Johnson's very fortuitous position to lead the California Progressive Movement.

Background

In an earlier period of American history, it was the lawyers, clergy and other professional men who held positions of authority. By the end of the 19th Century, however, industrial leaders had usurped the position of the professionals and had done it in a way which was repugnant to their moral ethic. So, naturally, the Progressive Movement received strong support from professional or middle class groups. The consciousness of the professionals in relation to industry's replacement of their authority and the gross manner of industrial rule jelled near the turn of the century. In California the position of the Southern Pacific Railroad reflected the situation throughout the nation where industry had become dangerously powerful. Not content with a transportation monopoly, the Southern Pacific controlled both the Republican and Democratic parties in California as well. Reform in California, then, was directed primarily against the Southern Pacific Railroad.
The California Progressive Movement started in Los Angeles in 1902 when Dr. John R. Haynes succeeded in passing the initiative, referendum and recall in city politics. In 1906 Edward Dickson, Assistant Editor of the Express and Meyer Lissner, Russ Avery and Marshall Stimpson, all lawyers, formed the initial group that led to success in California. The following year, in San Francisco, graft trials began against Abe Ruef and Mayor Schmitz which were led by Francis Heney and Hiram Warren Johnson. After Heney was shot, Johnson took over the prosecution and proved himself to be a fiery speaker and a tough fighter. This was to become very important, because Los Angeles and San Francisco were traditionally anti-and pro-labor, respectively. Johnson's anti-graft stance helped overshadow his past labor affiliations, for to win State office support from the populous southern half of the State was necessary for success.

Mr. Edward Dickson met Mr. Chester Rowell, a newspaper reporter from Fresno, while covering the activities of the California legislature in Sacramento. These two men became the moving force behind the Lincoln-Roosevelt League, which had as its goal the removal of the Southern Pacific Railroad from California's politics. In November 1907 the Lincoln-Roosevelt League captured the Sacramento municipal government much to the embarrassment of the Southern Pacific's political machine. By 1909 California's politicians began to give cognizance to the reform movement and passed some preliminary reform measures, including a direct primary bill. In the same year, the term 'Progressive' was applied to the reform movement in California and the scene was set for the revolution that was about to take place, a revolution that was to be led by Johnson.

California's Progressivism

Complicating any attempt to define Progressivism are two factors. First is that the movement was not supported by a homogeneous group. Though its supporters all wanted to return America's middle class back to authority, each group within the movement had its own special goal. For example, temperance had little to do with conservation. Harold Howland likened the
movement to a great river fed by many streams. Second is that there was a difference in attitude between the various supporters of the movement and the men who eventually rose to lead it. Many of the followers of these diverse groups were quite adamant about the purity of their own goals and would brook no compromise, whereas the leaders of the movement, including Johnson, were political realists. Because of these two factors, Progressivism has been labeled many things and has been judged either success or failure depending upon one’s opinion of what the movement was or should have been.

Though it is difficult to light upon an acceptable definition of Progressivism, I venture the following: Progressivism was a movement represented by a displaced class (the professionals) which desired to correct and improve the moral precepts of the class which had replaced it (the industrialists) by imposing governmental restraint upon industry. This definition must be tempered by the following: (1) Progressives did not like to make class distinctions and most thought of themselves as independent men. (2) Pragmatism might be identified with the leaders of the movement, but not necessarily with the movement’s followers. (3) The leaders of the movement had personality flaws which made it difficult for the continued success of the movement. In other words, the Progressive Movement was a response to America’s transformation from a rural-commercial society to an urban-industrial society and the incongruities that came about during this change.

Hiram Warren Johnson

Johnson was born in Sacramento in 1866, went to the University of California at Berkeley and passed the State bar examination in 1888. He practiced law with his father in Sacramento until he broke with his father over the issue of the Southern Pacific Railroad’s position in California’s politics. This break took place in 1902 when Johnson then left Sacramento for San Francisco, where he set up his own law practice. He became involved with the Teamster’s Union and helped them with several problems, which
helped Johnson's position with labor in San Francisco. Nevertheless, it was this same Johnson who initially helped with and finally took over the prosecution of the graft trials in San Francisco which were directed against the leaders of the Labor Union Party, Boss Abe Ruef and Mayor Eugene Schmitz. Johnson’s participation in the graft trials brought him statewide recognition and his law practice began to flourish.

Here was the perfect candidate for the reform movement. He was supported by labor in San Francisco because of his earlier position on labor, and he was also supported by anti-labor groups elsewhere in the State because of his prosecution of San Francisco's corrupt labor leaders. However, when he was approached by the Lincoln-Roosevelt League to be their gubernatorial candidate, he absolutely refused. He did not wish to leave his law practice, and his wife did not want to go to Sacramento. Appeals by representatives of the Lincoln-Roosevelt League were finally made directly to Mrs. Johnson, and with the understanding that Johnson would be supported for the Senate after finishing his governorship, she accepted the idea of letting her husband run for governor.

Johnson’s inability to cooperate with others showed early when he insisted upon running his own campaign without the Lincoln-Roosevelt League. Meyer Lissner wrote Chester Rowell that it was best to let Johnson alone and concentrate their efforts on organization and fund raising. (Johnson’s campaign style is still evident in California today. Most campaigns are organized around the candidate and not the party organization.) In Johnson's defense, however, he did travel many thousands of miles throughout California in an open touring car, delivering speeches and driving home the point that the Southern Pacific Railroad must be eliminated from California’s politics.

An interesting point of the election was the sources of Johnson’s support. In Southern California, even though Johnson had concentrated his efforts elsewhere, he received overwhelming support. This can be explained by his choice of running mate, Albert J. Wallace, who was the president of the Anti-Saloon League in Los Angeles. The temperance movement had considerable strength in Los Angeles and saloons were particularly abhorrent to
temperance adherents. As already stated, Johnson's record with the Teamsters in San Francisco garnered much support for him there, and his public exposure gained during the anti-graft trials helped his image in the rest of the State. With a solid base in both Los Angeles and San Francisco, Johnson concentrated his efforts in the central valley and other agricultural areas to gain the support of the large farm owners and ranchers. It was this aspect of the campaign, perhaps, that revealed the true nature of the movement as that of one privileged group (large farm owners and ranchers) against another privileged group (the railroad). It was, after all, the agricultural community which suffered greatly from the capricious transportation rates set by the Southern Pacific Railroad.

Politically sound as Johnson's campaign strategy was, this concentration or focusing of efforts on the farm communities and the negative results the movement had for farm workers cause this writer to suspect that Johnson may have made some implicit promises to the large farm owners concerning farm labor. One cannot find any direct evidence for this charge and, indeed, Mr. Mowry calls Johnson an incorruptible man; but, since farm labor was excluded from the Workingman's Compensation laws of both 1911 and 1913, one can certainly look with some suspicion at Johnson's concentration of his campaign in the farming areas. (Farm laborers in the United States were among the last to be unionized and even today they do not enjoy nearly as much pay and benefits that most union members in the United States do.)

After his election in 1911, in his inaugural address, Johnson insisted upon two things: One, efficiency in government and, two, the elimination of special interests from California's politics. (These have a familiar ring in politics today.) In 1911, the California progressive legislature introduced over 800 bills and 23 State constitutional amendments. The more important measures that passed were the referendum, initiative and recall. The recall, which included judges, passed only with the help of Johnson's concerted efforts. There was also some sympathy generated for the recall measure by
the California Supreme Court's decision to overturn Abe Ruef's conviction. Women suffrage became law and the State established a strong railroad commission. In 1913 the Workingman's Compensation law was made compulsory (except for farm laborers) and a commission to control industry was established. Moreover, a Board of Control was set up to provide a businesslike procedure for compiling the State's annual budget.

While these admirable laws were being passed, however, Johnson's inability to trust or work with others kept evincing itself. At the 1912 Republican Party Convention in Chicago, when the Convention leaders started to throw the 200 uncommitted delegates to Taft, Johnson, rather than stay and fight for the Republican nomination for Theodore Roosevelt by caucusing and compromising, led the Progressive group out of the Convention. This action effectively split the Republican Party during the 1912 campaign and, though Johnson was chosen as Roosevelt's running mate on the Bull Moose ticket, the ultimate result was a sweeping victory for the Democratic Party. In 1916 Johnson reached the limits of his suspicious nature when, though already elected to the U. S. Senate, he would not leave his unfinished term as governor. In fact, he did not leave for Washington D. C. until 1917 when President Wilson finally called him to come and take his place in the Senate.

Conclusion

Hiram Warren Johnson led the California Progressives to a great victory and eliminated the Southern Pacific Railroad from California's politics. If Mr. Bell, Johnson's opponent in the 1910 gubernatorial campaign, had been elected he would probably have attempted to carry out a similar reform program, but it is doubtful whether Mr. Bell could have brought into the legislature the support necessary to make the reforms that Johnson and the Progressives accomplished. In this sense, Johnson was the necessary catalyst that the Progressive Movement needed for a sweeping reform of California's politics, a reform which even Mr. Herrin, the Southern Pacific Railroad's political agent, admitted was a good thing for the State, adding that no one
would want to return to the old system. Nevertheless, Johnson's intransigence contributed greatly to the defeat of Roosevelt in 1912, and this writer wonders what course might the world have taken had Theodore Roosevelt been President of the United States when World War I broke out in 1914.

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